

BRIEFING PAPER

A Primer on Nationally Determined Contributions 3.0

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are at the heart of the Paris Agreement. They represent each country's self-determined climate targets to limit global warming to well below 2°C, not exceeding 1.5°C, above pre-industrial levels. NDC 3.0 refers to the next generation of these contributions, emphasising enhanced ambition, transparency, and implementation strategies. Current NDCs fall dramatically short of the necessary collective emissions reductions and instead would lead to catastrophic 2.1–2.8°C global warming. As the world increasingly faces the ferocity of the climate crisis, countries urgently need to ramp up ambition in the next NDCs to keep global climate goals within reach. This Primer on NDC 3.0 explains the NDC process, describes current gaps and presents key elements of next generation NDCs for ambitious climate action.

1 The NDC process

The idea of country-specific voluntary pledges to tackle the climate crisis developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). These pledges have become a cornerstone of international climate action. Within the UNFCCC system, a gradual shift occurred from the Kyoto Protocol's controversial binding targets only for developed countries in 1997, to the Lima Call for Climate Action in 2014, which invited all countries to submit their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs)¹ – the prequel to NDCs – as a foundation for the upcoming negotiations in Paris the following year.

The Paris Agreement in 2015 marked a breakthrough for global climate action. Among many aspects, it set global climate goals, in particular keeping global average temperature rise well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit it to well under 1.5°C. The Agreement also institutionalised the NDC process as a cyclical mechanism increasing ambition over time based on voluntary national targets and plans of all countries, and recognised the different historical responsibilities of countries for climate change and their different capacities to act on it (common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities, CBDR-RC).

While Parties agreed in Paris on long-term climate targets and the NDC mechanism, they postponed a decision on the technical guidelines for robust NDCs and transparent reporting until 2018. At COP24 in Katowice, countries agreed on most issues and adopted guidelines colloquially called the Paris Rulebook, officially the Katowice Climate Package.² The Paris Rulebook is a vast and complex set of technical guidelines, including on the methodological consistency for emissions reporting, adaptation communications, and the enhanced transparency framework. For the third round of NDCs, the application of the Paris Rulebook becomes mandatory for all parties.

Under the Paris Agreement, countries are required to prepare, communicate, and maintain successive NDCs, outlining their plans to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adapt to climate impacts. To ensure that

¹ Almost all parties submitted INDCs before or shortly after Paris. With the ratification of the Paris Agreement, parties were invited to turn INDCs into NDCs. For a detailed analysis of INDCs, see for instance W. P. Pauw et al., 2018, '[Beyond Headline Mitigation Numbers: We Need More Transparent and Comparable NDCs to Achieve the Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#)', *Climatic Change* 147, pp. 23–29 (accessed 29 September 2024).

² United Nations, 2024, [Katowice Climate Package](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

these individual commitments are collectively sufficient to achieve the long-term temperature goals of the agreement, the Paris Agreement includes a mechanism that takes stock of actions so far and for progressively increasing ambition over time ('ratchet mechanism'). Every five years, countries are expected to submit new NDCs that reflect their 'highest possible ambition'. The next round of NDCs is due by early 2025 with parties expected to present more ambitious emissions reduction targets for 2035. However, not all countries have followed this standard in the past and the targets are not legally binding.

2 NDC 2.0 and gaps

NDCs 2.0 have ratcheted up ambition and, compared to the first generation, a majority is more extensive and contains quantifiable goals and economy-wide targets.³ Based on action so far, the first Global Stocktake (GST) was concluded in December 2023 in Dubai.⁴ The GST decision recognises, as a novelty, the global need to 'transition away from fossil fuels' by 2050. It also calls for the tripling of renewable energy capacity and the doubling of energy efficiency by 2030, among other areas such as halting and reversing deforestation, more sustainable lifestyles, and promotion of circular economy approaches. However, the GST also notes that collective targets remain highly insufficient. In fact, current NDCs contain a set of serious shortcomings., according to the Energy Transition Commission.⁵

First, the current generation of NDCs lacks ambition. Stated contributions would lead to 2.1–2.8°C global warming by 2100, with catastrophic consequences for life on earth.⁶ The sizable emissions gap is incompatible with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and urgently require more ambitious efforts. It is compounded by an implementation gap where even the already limited targets are not met, suggesting insufficient financing and the deficient application of policies.⁷ Second, alongside the insufficient emissions reductions, many NDCs do not provide adequate information on how to achieve their targets, in particular on the scope and structure of financial needs and the policies which could support implementation. To make things worse, they are often isolated from existing national strategies and efforts. Finally, NDCs 2.0 are often inconsistent in the types of targets they contain as well as which GHG emissions and sectors these targets cover. They also often lack methodological details on measurements and baselines, which make cost estimates and inter-comparability difficult.

3 What is a good NDC 3.0?

The new generation of NDCs is due by 10 February 2025, with an implementation end date of 2035 for new targets. These NDCs 3.0 are the first to benefit from the full cycle of the Paris Agreement's ratcheting mechanisms, most notably the GST. They will need to overcome the shortcomings mentioned above and ramp up ambition. At the same time, they will be developed by 195 very different countries, under different circumstances, with differing capabilities and responsibilities for the climate crisis. While acknowledging their highly contextual nature, there are key elements which substantive NDCs 3.0, aligned with the Paris Agreement, contain.

³ United Nations, 2023, [What are NDCs and How do They Drive Climate Action?](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

⁴ United Nations, 2023, [Decision 1/CMA.5 Outcomes of the Global Stocktake \(Advanced Unedited Version\)](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

⁵ Energy Transition Commission, 2024, [Credible Contributions: Bolder Plans for Higher Climate Ambition in the Next Round of NDCs](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme, 2023, [Emissions Gap Report 2023](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

⁷ Climate Action Tracker, 2024, [Guide to a Good 2035 Climate Target](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

3.1 Responsivity and comprehensiveness

According to Article 14 of the Paris Agreement, and for the first time, the next generation of NDCs must be informed by the outcomes of the GST. The GST has clearly stated that parties must urgently close the existing emissions gap to 1.5°C warming within this decade. NDCs must demonstrate a progression and include enhanced 2030 and 2035 targets, according to trajectories suggested by the IPCC.⁸ Collectively, NDCs emissions reductions must amount to at least 43% by 2030 and 60% by 2035 relative to 2019 levels, to limit warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot.⁹ Parties must not postpone action to 2035, but ensure that 2030 targets are already Paris aligned. To realistically keep within the goals of the Paris Agreement, NDCs of developed and G20 countries have to include economy-wide emissions reduction targets that clearly outline the respective policy approach and methodological assumptions.

NDCs 3.0 must also be as comprehensive as possible and work in a transparent, just, and strategic manner. Moreover, all countries should also set targets to reduce all GHG gases, in particular methane, besides carbon dioxide. Finally, NDCs need to anchor measures for adaptation and loss and damage, alongside mitigation. For adaptation, NDCs can be used to identify and address the existing gaps and needs,¹⁰ in line with the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience¹¹ and responding to the Global Goal on Adaptation.¹² Likewise, to account for the hazardous impacts of climate change around the world, NDCs 3.0 could also include national targets, definitions, and mappings regarding loss and damage.¹³

3.2 Equity, financing, and support

Countries have different historical responsibilities for the climate crisis and different means to respond accordingly. Thus, progress on individual NDCs is to be achieved in the context of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.¹⁴ It is clear that developed countries, given their historical responsibility, need to take the lead, with stronger targets, higher ambition, and adequate support for developing countries.

Financial support, in particular, has so far fallen woefully short of demand. Thus, developed countries need to provide substantially more finance and transparently communicate the instruments and structure of finance (loans, grants, etc.).¹⁵ Conversely, developing countries should include comprehensive plans in their NDCs 3.0 to establish a clear link between needs and action. A little over half of current NDCs stated specific cost estimates.¹⁶ To account for the complexity of such plans, technical and capacity support by developed countries must be provided where requested. Existing support structures such as the NDC Navigator and the NDC Partnership can be a first vantage point, though they need more resources to address increasingly complex NDC development. Plans should be comparable and specify costs and expected results, at least for the conditional elements of the NDCs, which are contingent on international support.¹⁷ Following a fair shares

⁸ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023, [Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme, 2023, [Adaptation Gap Report 2023](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹¹ See United Nations, 2023, [UAE Framework on Global Climate Resilience](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹² United Nations, 2024, [Global Goal on Adaptation](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹³ WWF, Practical Action, 2020, [Anchoring Loss and Damage in Enhanced NDCs](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹⁴ United Nations, 2023, [Decision 1/CMA.5 Outcomes of the Global Stocktake \(Advanced Unedited Version\)](#), para. 167 (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹⁵ Climate Action Tracker, 2024, [Guide to a Good 2035 Climate Target](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹⁶ World Resources Institute, 2022, [How Countries Can Pay for Climate Action](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹⁷ Climate Action Network, 2024, [Guidelines for NDCs 3.0: Delivering on the GST Outcome and Beyond](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

approach, all countries should provide clear evidence of the proportionality of their efforts and the level and kind of support they provide or require.¹⁸

3.3 Inclusivity and fairness

NDCs 3.0 must respond to the GST's call for a 'just, orderly, and equitable' transition away from fossil fuels.¹⁹ Alongside equity between countries, NDC development must ensure equity within them. Transition processes must be 'people-centred', based on solidarity and justice as key design principles guiding the national development process, its substance, and implementation.²⁰ Recognising the transformational potential of NDCs, deeply impacting peoples' lives – from health to jobs and local economies – they must clearly link climate action with Sustainable Development Goals. NDCs must address existing inequalities, poverty, and exclusion through rights-based approaches that are gender-responsive, sensitive to potential land disputes, and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights, among other requirements.²¹ Democratic, participatory processes are key to engage all relevant stakeholders and leverage expertise and local knowledge, foster long-term ownership, build legitimacy and public acceptance. Prioritising equity, climate justice, and inclusivity leads to more ambitious and effective outcomes, and NDCs 3.0 must seize this opportunity.

3.4 Formal standards, transparency, monitoring

NDCs should explicitly detail how parties have responded to the GST outcomes, including the actions and assumptions made to align with sectoral guidance, and the underlying indicators, benchmarks, data, and so forth, creating a transparent pathway for achieving climate goals. This can facilitate a progression on targets and (public) engagement in the development and implementation process as well as scrutiny throughout.²² The Paris Rulebook provides a comprehensive (though incomplete) set of guidelines, relevant to NDCs. Tracking progress on NDCs, for instance, is essential. A central feedback mechanism in this regard is the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF). Its Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs) must be utilised as a regular review process alongside the GST. Reporting requirements must take into account developing countries capacities, with developed countries to provide sufficient support (see 2. Equity, financing, and support).²³ In terms of substance, the absolute, economy-wide emissions reduction targets for all GHG gases as part of NDCs 3.0 (see 1. Responsivity and comprehensiveness) have to be unambiguous. Intelligible accounting aside, they should prioritise domestic decarbonisation, with targets clearly separated from the use of carbon management methods (CCS, CCU, CDR), carbon sinks such as forestry, and carbon markets.²⁴

4 Conclusion

NDCs are at the core of the Paris Agreement. They represent each country's self-determined climate targets to limit global warming. NDC 3.0 refers to the next generation of these contributions, due latest 10 February 2025, emphasising enhanced ambition, transparency, and implementation strategies. Current NDCs fall

¹⁸ See for instance Kemp-Benedict et al., 2024, [The Climate Equity Reference Calculator](#), Berkeley and Somerville: Climate Equity Reference Project (accessed 29 September 2024).

¹⁹ United Nations, 2023, [Decision 1/CM.5 Outcomes of the Global Stocktake \(Advanced Unedited Version\)](#), para 28. d), para 10 (accessed 29 September 2024).

²⁰ Climate Action Network, 2024, [Guidelines for NDCs 3.0: Delivering on the GST Outcome and Beyond](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

²¹ Ibid.

²² WWF, 2024, [WWF Checklist for the NDCs We Want](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

²³ NDC 3.0 Navigator, 2024, [Aligning NDC and Transparency Processes](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

²⁴ Climate Action Tracker, 2024, [Guide to a Good 2035 Climate Target](#) (accessed 29 September 2024).

dramatically short of the necessary collective emissions reductions and instead would lead to catastrophic 2.1–2.8°C global warming.

The next, third, generation of NDCs benefits from the full cycle of the Paris Agreement’s ratcheting mechanism, the GST. There, it says that parties must urgently close the existing emissions gap to 1.5°C warming within this decade, which, according to the GST means to ‘transition away from fossil fuels’. NDCs must include enhanced 2035 targets, according to trajectories suggested by the IPCC. Collectively, NDCs emissions reductions must amount to at least 43% by 2030 and 60% by 2035 relative to 2019 levels, to limit warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot. It is clear that developed countries, given their historical responsibility, need to take the lead, with stronger targets, higher ambition, and adequate support for developing countries.²⁵

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²⁵ Germanwatch and more than a dozen of other organisations have developed ten tests that NDCs should pass for countries to stay on track and limit global warming, see: [Ten Tests for Countries' New Climate Plans that Will Make or Break 1.5C](#) (accessed 1 October 2024).